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Not Another Outback Trip!

I know it's tough, but someone has to do it. This one, towards the end of year 2000, was aimed at seeing Cooper Creek in flood, then seeing Lake Eyre half full from previous heavy rains in Queensland, and passing through the Flinders Ranges on the way there and back.

The party of 14 in two vehicles included four, or maybe five, bird atlassers who, of course, did all the serious work while the rest of the party lounged around and offered caustic comment such as "mad dogs and birders go out in the midday sun".

Morgan on the Murray in South Australia was the starting point and from there we headed off into the Mallee country through the Bookmark Biosphere Conservation Reserve to emerge on the Barrier Highway at Yunta, and then on across the arid Mulga country to the Flinders. The first night of camping in the Mallee was easy stuff, using the old shearers' rooms at Calperum and then more of the same thing at Canopus Station, now Rangers' quarters for the Dangal Conservation Park. The whole Biosphere is an internationally recognised Reserve with some very large specimens of Mallees, not the stunted, coppiced regrowth we are used to. It covers 9000 square kilometres that used to be the crown-leased grazing properties of Taylorville, Calperum, Chowilla and Danggali along the S.A./N.S.W border.

Somewhere out there 'Cup Day' occurred and, lo and behold, out came the cutaway tails and floral hats to mark the occasion as we drew our horses for the sweep. To hold the winning ticket, but then resell it to a very persuasive lady from the Kelly country of N.E. Victoria, goes to show that horse stealing is still alive and well. It was better to concentrate on the vegetation - Pussy-tails (Mulla Mulla), saltbush and bluebush on the Riverine plains, Trioda (Porcupine Grass) on the harder country, the legume family of Desert Cassia (now Senna) was prominent, but there was only one find of Sturt's Desert Pea. The Bramble Wattle (*Ac. victoriae*) in flower soon became a familiar sight as was the aptly named Dead Finish Wattle.

Good rains had passed through setting the countryside awash with the colour of ripening corn, and now fine weather was promised, but oh!, how

fickle this can be, as rain set in approaching the Flinders Ranges and the road turned to mud, calling for a change of plan with our longed-for camp in the renowned Chambers Gorge abandoned and a diversion to Wirrealpa Homestead keyed in before the mud overwhelmed us. Here was hospitality indeed; individual rooms in the shearers' quarters, hot showers, all mod. cons., kitchen and mess room fully equipped and the owners joining us for dinner, by which time the rain had moved on, so we could walk and enjoy the evening views.

Birding never ceased (such is our devotion) and 9 Wedge-tailed Eagles and 2 Spotted Harriers were recorded for the day's raptor watch, followed by 20 species for the Atlas around the homestead, including Mallee Ringnecks, Australian Owlet Nightjar, Red-backed Kingfisher, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (staying with us thereafter), Chirruping Wedgebill and more than one Red-capped Robin.

The next day the sun powered to work drying the road in no time at all, so off we set, marvelling at the multicoloured Flinders rocks and slopes covered with Cyprus pines, and so through Blinman and down the ever-changing scenery of the Parachilna Gorge before turning north to Maree and on to the mighty Cooper.

We were now four days out, and populated centres were well behind as we left the Birdsville track to follow faint tyre tracks along a fence line to the Cooper 7 kms away. Four hours, and more like 17 kms later, we made it in the dark, despite two punctures and being bogged in the sand up to the axles. But it was worth every travail. The Cooper - you couldn't miss it with the constant chatter of tens of thousands of water birds - was flowing wide and purposefully to nowhere! This massive body of water in channel after channel flowing steadily on as if nothing could stop it until swallowed up by the sand somewhere between Lake Eyre and us. Here we stayed for three days and nights, with our swags under the shade of the Coolibahs (well, what do you know? its a member of our own Box-tree family) and it was worth every minute of it. The water was drinkable, albeit on the tasty side, thanks to birds and brine, but beautiful just the same to just float in to escape the heat.

We listed 75 bird species while here, from Ducks - Plumed Whistling to Blue-billed, Pink-eared and Hardheads - plus a host of others out of range. There were also Darters and herons, waders and terns in numbers, including a wonderful find of juvenile Banded Stills, but no adults. Cockatiels, Bluebonnets and Budgerigars made up the parrot family, both Variegated and White-winged Fairy Wrens were present as well as Crimson and Orange chats and the Cinnamon Quail -thrush.

This was halfway, so we retraced our steps to Maree and onto Muloorina Station, camping in the oasis of the bore out-flow after flights from the homestead over southern Lake Eyre. If the chance comes to see Lake Eyre from the air while it is in flood, grab it! The colouring and reflections are breathtaking. But back to the birds, with 43 species along the bore channel, including Pelicans, egrets, herons and ibis. There were Brolgas, Black-tailed Native Hens, Grey-crowned and White-browed Babblers, species of both swallows and martins and Clamorous Reed-warblers. From thence unto the Flinders Ranges and a creek side camp in the gorges, just 24 hours after a fierce storm and flash flood had washed backpackers down stream, fortunately without loss of life. Finally, before leaving the Flinders, some observers, but not all, had seen the Red-throat - a good find - but the Banded Whiteface remained elusive.

Back through Hawker to Quorn and so to the last camp of the tour in the Buckarina Gorge where birds took a back seat to the eye-catching Yelllow-footed Rock Wallabies; one of the few populations still extant and secure in a perfect setting, without fences and signs. What a beautiful creature it is at close quarters, quite unafraid, and inclined to sit on a rock and observe the humans observing it.

From there it was back to the starting point through old and mellow Melrose, with its beautiful gardens, Native Frangipani and Purple-crowned Lorikeets at the foot of Mount Remarkable. After this it only remained to go our separate ways at Burra, at the gate of the Old Gaol used in the filming of 'Breaker Morant'.

Our tour is over, but the memory of outback-camp-cooked Quandong Pie lingers on.

Chris Morris

From the Wilds of Specimen Gully

During my tramping about in the most isolated valleys in this area, and these are on long alienated bushland no longer rough grazed by sheep, but occasionally used as a firewood source, I noticed that along an area where Devonian age granodiorite abuts an already much heated and folded Ordovician geology, there appears to be evidence of a hypothermal dyke, and on the ridges made up of this mixture there are unusual plant communities.

There at least three sites were Leopard Orchids grow and *Tetratheca cilliata* and *Brunonia australis* are common and widespread, as are *Casuarina verticillata*. There are many Candles and *Pimelea humilis* in a blanket of Raspwort and Rock Fern.

However, there are some uncommon plants too, and Austral Bear's Ears and what appears to be a Crepis are widespread. Mixed up with this floral assemblage is a quite tall Craspedia, but what is unusual is an expanding assemblage of Cut-leaf Goodenia. This is thickest on the small ridge which grows good Bursaria and has a tree containing a Tuan.

But to the east, in what is generally deemed tall introduced grass roadsides, there are small colonies of Pimelea humilis and plants of Dianella revoluta, and not only is there a flourishing Tree Violet, but a small group of Blue Devils and an unusual Pimelea with oval leaves. This latter is in the middle of Freeway Corridor No. 4 and is the only example of Blue Devils on their lists - except it has not been included in them . For that matter, neither is the *Casuarina verticillata* or the Acacia mearnsii and the apparent cross between a Blackwood and a Lightwood.

What originally attracted my attention to the Blue Devil area were the Hoary Sunrays about to flower. They are in dense assemblages on the Calder Highway near Harcourt, but have only been recorded on the Midland Highway, but many reports are studded with errors and omissions nowadays, and probably all unintentional. Databases must be a mess of mistakes.

Ian Johnson

The Australian Naturalists Network

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club is part of the Australian Naturalists Network. When travelling, you might care to visit one of the other clubs in the network.

Below is a list of the clubs. Where the name of the meeting place is different to the Club name, the Club name is given in parentheses. An asterisk indicates that there is more than one meeting per month.
I can provide further information e.g. meeting place and time, and contact person(s).

South Australia
Adelaide (FNS of SA) - 2nd Wed*
Bordertown FNS - 3rd Thurs Jul & Nov
Kangaroo Is F&FC - excursions
Mt Gambier FNS - 3rd Frid
Murray Bridge FNS - 2nd weekend
Naracoorte/Lucindale FNS - excursions
Port Lincoln (Friends of S Pens Parks)
Berri (Riverland FN) - Feb
Victor Harbour (South Coast FN) - 3rd Frid

Victoria
Albury-Wodonga FNC - twice monthly
Alexandra (Upper Goulburn FN) 3rd Tues

Anglesea (Angair) -last Frid
Ararat & Dist FNC - bimonthly
Bairnsdale & Dist FNC - 3rd Frid
Ballarat (FNC of Ballarat) - 1st Frid
Bendigo FNC - 2nd Wed*
Casterton FNC - 2nd Tues
Castlemaine FNC - 2nd Frid
Creswick FNC - 3rd Thurs
Donald H & NHG - 1st Frid
Frankston (Peninsula FNC) - 2nd Wed
Geelong FNC -1st Tues*
Hamilton FNC - 3rd Thurs
Maryborough FNC - 1st Mon
Blackburn (FNC of Victoria) - various*
Mildura (Sunraysia FNC) - 3rd Wed*
Morwell (Latrobe Valley FNC) 4th Frid
Portland FNC - 4th Wed
Ringwood FNC - 2nd Wed
Sale (FNC of Sale & Dist) - 1st Frid
Shepparton (Broken Creek FNC) - 4th Sun (excn)
St Arnaud FNC - 2nd Wed
Stawell FNC - 4th Mon
Nyah West (Mid-Murray FNC) - 3rd Frid
Timboon FNC - 1st Frid
Wangaratta (NE FNC) - last Frid
Warrnambool FNC - 4th Wed

Northern Territory
Alice Springs FNC- 2nd Wed
Winnellie (N Territory FNC) - 2nd Wed

NSW & ACT
Broken Hill (Barrier FNC) - 2nd Wed
Canberra (FNA of Canberra) - 1st Thurs
Deniliquin (S Riverina NC) -1st Tue & 1st F
Goulburn FNS - 4th Frid

Queensland
Boonah (Fassifern FNC) - 3rd Sat (excn)
Bunya Mountains NHA - last Sun (quarterly)
Chinchilla FNC - 3rd Frid
Dalby (Lake Broadwater NHA) - 4th Tues
Green Mountain NHA - occasionally
Gympie & Dist FNC - 3rd Tues
Murgon FNC - 1st Mon
Stanthorpe FNC - 4th Wed
West End (The Queensland FNC) - 3rd Mon
Toowoomba FNC - 1st Frid

Western Australia
Bunbury NC - 3rd Thurs
Capel (Busselton NC)
Kalamunda (Darling Range Branch) -2nd Fri
Kalgoorlie (Goldfields NC) - 1st Frid
Karratha (Nickol Bay NC) -even months
Perth (WA NC) - 1st Frid
Rockingham (Kwinana etc Branch) 3rd Frid
Toodyay NC - 3rd Sat
Mullaloo - 1st Tues

Tasmania
Burnie FNC - 3rd Frid
Devonport FNC - contact Club
Hobart (Tasmanian FNC) - 1st Thurs
King Island FNC - 1st Sun (excn)
Launceston FNC - 1st Tues
St Helens (NE Tasmanian FNC) - (excn)

Very few clubs meet in January, and some do not meet in December. Some clubs have excursions only.

Ern Perkins.

Observations

• George Broadway reported that the highlight of the weekend at the BOCA camp at St Arnaud was watching a Squirrel Glider emerging from its hollow and gliding from tree to tree in broad daylight.

• Natalie de Maccus watched fascinated at her place as White-winged Choughs groomed their young ones.

• A report from Debbie Worland - The Latham's Snipe were back at the Golf Club the second week in December, and she went back to check on the Cuckoo-shrikes that were seen during the BOCA Bird Count, and not only was she able to confirm that they were White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes, she also found that there was a nesting pair and she watched "the changing of the guard" as one took over nesting duties from the other.

• Chris Morris has Spotted Pardalotes nesting in the shed at his place in Little Bendigo.

• Lloyd and Betty Curtis have had a pair of Spotted Pardalotes nesting in a bank a couple of metres from their back door. About mid-December the male took up position on the twig near the entrance and started to call in a totally different way from the usual call - more high-pitched - and kept moving from the perch to the tunnel and back as if inviting the youngsters to come out. Lloyd and Betty were not able to wait around to see what would happen, but when they returned home the family were gone.

• On 7/1 we stopped to chat to a neighbour as we were on the way to have supper with friends. As we were about to drive off I was told that she had

"something in the tree out the front" that I might be interested in. Two owls. There had been three together earlier in the afternoon. I walked back with her to find myself being solemnly surveyed by two Tawny Frogmouths. Several times over the next weeks Doug and I saw all three, with one often in a nearby tree on its own. Rita Mills

• On a very hot day 11/1, a flock of Brown-headed Honeyeaters arrived to enjoy the sprinkler at 118 Blakeley Road. One juvenile was flying around and around in the spray, and then perching to preen, while others were sitting in the leaves of a cotoneaster using the water falling on the leaves for their wash. Rita Mills

• Maureen Dredge reports that Greenfinches have appeared at their place at Wattle Flat. They also have had a juvenile Horsfields Bronze-cuckoo keeping in company with Yellow-rumped Thornbills. The foster parents?

• Chris Morris reported a Swamp Harrier at Expedition Pass Reservoir, a Black-shouldered Kite at Ten Foot Hill (Ken Dredge had earlier reported one, possibly the same bird, back at Happy Valley last month) and Ironbarks flowering at Little Bendigo (they usually flower in winter). Numbers of Musk Lorikeets have been visiting them. He has found one Little Lorrikeet dead, and apparently unmarked, under the tree. He also has found that the New Holland Honeyeaters are relishing the Knifophias (Red Hot Pokers).

Are native birds feeding on non-native plants in your garden? It would be interesting to get records from members.

• There were several reports of Spine-tailed Swifts (White-throated Needletails) Ern Perkins reported that they were flying low over his garden in Doveton Street on the evening of 22/1, George Broadway saw them on the Poverty Gully Track on the morning of the same day, and Rita Mills saw a flock hawking for insects at the northern end of Rocky Valley Reservoir near Falls Creek on 17/1.

• While Ern and Lesley Perkins were at Falls Creek the week before, they spotted a tunnel in the bank at the side of the road at Howman's Gap, and realised they could see the head of a wombat which was dozing in the entrance.

• George Broadway passed on the information that there is a family of Sugar Gliders living in the ceiling of a house near the top end of Lyttleton Street.

• **Again, I would appreciate reports in writing - an old envelope or scrap of paper is fine! Articles or reports for the CN can always be handed to Noellene at Tonks Bros., too. Thanks, Ed.**

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING, 25/1

A research paper in the Victorian Naturalist, "Values and Knowledge of Wildlife among members of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria", might be of interest to you. Ern Perkins has a copy if you'd like to read it.

PROGRAMME

EXCURSIONS **General Meetings** Are held in the Uniting church (UCA) hall, at 8.00pm on the second Friday of each month, except January. Entrances to the car parks are beside the Art Gallery and beside the Church building in Lyttleton Street. **Excursions** leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days.

Business Meetings are held at 38 Campbell Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSIONS

Mon. Feb. 5 **Photopoint Handover and barbecue** at the old Courthouse. A social evening for the formal handover of the Photopoint Project to the Historical Society for storage.

Fri. Feb. 9 **Annual Meeting** followed by **Butterflies of Australia**. Speaker is Tony Morton. UCA hall, 8pm. This is our 25th Anniversary! The inaugural meeting was held above 13 Mostyn St. in February 1975, when it was the Education Centre.

- **Sat. Feb. 10, 8am Highway Cleanup.** Meet at the corner near Tait's Carriages. Wear sturdy shoes, hat etc, Gloves provided. Usually takes about an hour or less if their are plenty of helpers.

Sat. Feb. 10 **Bullarto Reservoir.** Leave 13 Mostyn St. at 1.30 pm. Leader is G. Broadway.

Fri Mar 9. **The new Bird Atlas, the good news and the bad news**. Speaker is Andrew Silcocks of Birds Australia. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. Mar 10 **Tipperary Springs, Daylesford** Leave 13 Mostyn St. at 1.30pm. Leader is C. Morris.

Fri. 9 - Mon. 12 March **VFNCA Campout at Rawson.**

Fri. 13 April Good Friday. There will be no general meeting for April.

Sat. 14 April **Local Geology** Leave 13 Mostyn St at 1.30pm Leader is E. Perkins.

Fri. May 11 **Antarctica and Patagonian National Parks.** Speaker is Carol Hall . UCA hall, 8pm,

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Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributor and not necessarily those of the club.

2000 Committee M. Dredge (President) ph 5470 6474E. Perkins (V.P. and Grievance Officer), G. Broadway (Sec.). ph. 5472 2513, J. Turnbull (treas.) ph. 5474 3005, R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), M. Oliver, C. Morris, K. Turner, Z . Thomas. B. Maund .

Subscriptions for 2000 -

Ordinary Membership: Single ,$22 Family, $30
Pensioner or student: Single $19 Family $24
Supporting: $31

The recommendation from the Committee is that the subscriptions for 2001 remain the same as for 2000.

The subscription also covers postage of the 'Castlemaine Naturalist'.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.
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